

» In Command but out of Control

» **Dr Arnoud Franken**
Senior Research Fellow
Strategy and Change

Many businesses are created as the result of an individual's desire to make the world a better place. But in order to remain focused and competitive, companies have to remain sensitive to the world around them and adapt their strategy. For managers and leaders this means continually motivating their workforce to move towards a potentially unknown future with unfamiliar risks and rewards. This can be tricky. It involves igniting a passion and drive in people to seek out new opportunities that will deliver better results. But how do you win the hearts and minds of those who can turn your big ideas into reality, when they may have different or even competing viewpoints and time is limited?

In 2008, the Royal Marines of 3 Commando Brigade found themselves confronted with exactly this dilemma.

Three days after they had taken over command of Task Force Helmand in Afghanistan, information was coming in that the Taliban were launching a major assault on the provincial capital with the objective of killing the governor and ejecting NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) from central Helmand. The Royal Marines had assumed the Taliban lacked the intent so only light defence of the area was required. Fortunately the outnumbered Royal Marines, NATO and Afghan national security forces in the area were able to cause the Taliban to retreat, for the time being.

The temporary defeat of the Taliban was no cause for celebration. Unless this unexpected threat was addressed quickly, it could re-emerge and cause havoc. The existing strategy was unable to prevent this from happening and was abandoned. A new strategy was needed but time and resources were limited.

“To remain focused and competitive, companies have to remain sensitive to the world around them and adapt their strategy.”

Crucially, it required the support and involvement of more than a dozen stakeholders, many of whom the Royal Marines had little or no control over. To complicate matters, not all of the stakeholders agreed that a new strategy was necessary and those that did agree had different reservations about the implications. The Royal Marines' traditional planning approach could not overcome these challenges. It was well suited for predictable scenarios and hierarchical structures, but not for reconciling competing viewpoints into a shared goal and unifying the efforts of a diverse network of stakeholders under turbulent conditions.

To solve this problem, the Royal Marines used a tool that accommodates multiple perspectives and recognises uncertainty – wargaming. Normally used for testing plans, the tool was successfully modified for developing strategy using a five step approach. The first step is to engage with the experts who represent all internal and external stakeholder groups. The second step is to gain a shared understanding of the situation by asking each stakeholder to provide an explanation of the situation faced from their perspective. It is at this point that time is spent considering and discussing events from others' perspectives and identifying potential causes and consequences of events. These hypotheses are tested by submitting each to the adversarial process of action-reaction-counter-action, and uncovering underpinning assumptions.

The third step in the process is to use this shared situational understanding to find the 'game changer' that achieves a common purpose and then identify a potential strategy to make it happen. It is then necessary to 'wargame' these concepts to understand the benefits, risks and implications before choosing the best concept based on feasibility, viability and desirability. The fourth step is to develop the chosen strategy into a detailed plan of action by drawing on the skills and experience of each stakeholder group and wargaming the key decision points and uncertainties of the plan to identify the risks and contingency plans. The final stage in the process is to communicate the plan and its purpose to all involved.

Wargaming engages people in a way that allows them to contribute from the start. Early engagement means they are five times more likely to commit to the cause than when ordered to do a given task. Wargaming facilitates this in a simple and pragmatic way, making it a powerful business tool for effecting change. MF

For further information contact the author at arnoud.franken@cranfield.ac.uk

